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ABSTRACT

The proliferation of critics and critical approaches has produced a trend toward fragmentation and isolation among the practitioners involved. A suggestive counter-trend indicates that there is intense curiosity among critics to watch colleagues encounter texts, grapple with the preliminary questions of stance and method, and share the experience of criticism as encounters with a text. Preoccupation with reflection on critical methods and stances usually occurs at the expense of the understanding of the critical experience that occurs prior to such reflection. An apt metaphor--the bureaucrat--describes this state of affairs because a bureaucrat's first duty is to perpetuate the rules and regulations of a solidified bureaucracy. How can scholars strike a balance between the habits and inclinations of the critic and the autonomy of the text, without resorting to a bureaucracy of method, especially when pressures from academia work to maintain this bureaucracy? A way is needed to remove methodological formalism from its central role in critical practice, without obliterating the importance of critical rigor in the process, so that the experience and interpretation of texts can return to main stage in criticism. For change to occur, it must begin at the individual level, with individual acts of rebellion against the bureaucracy. Ultimately, critics must realize that the experience of criticism is itself fundamentally anti-bureaucratic. What makes criticism interesting is the collision between a text, with all of its own tradition and context, and a critic, with all of his or her interests, intuitions, commitments, and curiosity. (References are attached.) (NKA)

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"Against the Bureaucratization of Criticism"

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"Against the Bureaucratization of Criticism"

ABSTRACT

The study and practice of criticism has produced a proliferation of critical methods. As the urge to demonstrate the virtuosity of method supplants the initial human curiosity, insight, and appreciation which underlie the critical impulse, critics come to resemble bureaucrats. This problem has institutional as well as philosophical roots. Although the problem is in large measure an institutional one, the solution may well be located at the individual level. Critics must cultivate their own sense of the worthwhile human question rather than become servants to method.

The Growth in Critical Research: Promise and Problems

Our field has enjoyed a tremendous growth in both the practice and philosophical study of criticism. This growth is seen in the number of programs centered on methodological and theoretical issues in the area sponsored at national, regional and state conventions, as well as in the proliferation of related national and regional conferences. Much, but not all, of this interest in recent years has been directed toward the the critical investigation of mediated messages, and can be traced in part to the recommendations of the Report of the Committee on the Advancement and Refinement of Rhetorical Criticism (1971). Indeed, even the recent changes in scope and focus of the "rhetorical criticism" forensics event betokens the growing recognition by more traditional rhetorical critics that their objects of scrutiny are more and more frequently mediated texts (Rosenthal, 1985). More evidence of this change is the launching four years ago of a new national journal (with a submission rate as high as any journal in our field) devoted to critical media studies.

Yet, whatever the nature of our objects of criticism, a long-standing problem exists: the proliferation of critics and critical approaches has produced an accompanying trend toward fragmentation and isolation among the practitioners involved. This pattern is not new; almost a decade ago, David Swanson complained that new theoretical or methodological statements about criticism tend to be greeted with deafening silence by other critics (Swanson, 1977: 208-9).

However, an interesting and suggestive counter-trend indicates that there is intense curiosity among critics to watch their

colleagues encounter texts, grapple with the preliminary questions of stance and method, and share the experience of criticism as encounter with a text. Evidence of this trend is largely anecdotal, drawn from national seminars and other accounts of the experience of critics working collaboratively. Noteworthy cases can be found in special seminars on the general topic sponsored at the last three Speech Communication Association conventions--"Versimilitude and Verification: The Understanding the Uses of Fictive Forms in Public Argument" (1984), "Televisual Texts and Rhetorical Criticism: An Evaluation and Critique of Existing Research" (1985), and "Against the Bureaucratization of Criticism: Problems in Comparative Media Criticism" (1986), from which this essay got its start. These reports further indicate that this sense of curiosity is sharpened when the texts under common examination are electronic or filmic, rather than print, although such a condition is not indispensable to our point.

Such exchanges, prior to any comparisons of finished criticism, are very frequently reported to be more rewarding and enjoyable, and to help practitioners see beyond the occasional provinciality of formal critical justification, locating commonalities not in methodological dogma but in the phenomenological experience of criticism itself.

This distinction is not new to our field, although recently we have seen an acceleration of this trend toward provincialism. We call this trend the bureaucratization of criticism--the setting up of camps, schools, "-isms," and so on, each based on allegiance to its own particular methodological prescriptions, theoretical analogs, or seminal figures. This acceleration has lent additional truth to an observation made over a decade ago by Lawrence Rosenfield (1974).

Rosenfield was discussing rhetorical criticism in particular, but his remarks are equally applicable to criticism in general:

> The literature of rhetorical criticism is filled with discussions of the aims, methods, scope, and argumentative strategies appropriate to critical activity, yet relatively little attention has been paid to the experience of criticizing itself (p. 489).

Of course, Rosenfield reminds readers that the distinction he notes, while fundamental, is only one dimension of successful criticism:

> We must bear in mind that our concern here is the experience from which the critical commentary springs. How the critic reasons or discourses about that experience is of course quite another matter. I am here claiming that intuition is an indispensable capacity of many critics, not that it provides legitimate justification for their interpretation (p. 496).

The reflection upon one's own perspective and commitments as a critic is not a substitute for careful justification of critical claims, but it is a necessary beginning which seems lamentably absent from much contemporary criticism.

We argue that the current preoccupation with reflection on critical methods and stances, while contributing greatly to the philosophical maturation of our field, nevertheless is occurring at the expense of our understanding of the experience by critic of text,

which is prior to such reflection--whether that priority is to be called existential, ontological, or phenomenological. This "indispensible capacity" is being lost in favor of the mechanics of criticism. The uniqueness brought to the critical experience by the critic--the person in the criticism--becomes secondary or tertiary in such a shift. While these insights should not be allowed to overpower the work, turning critical essays into autobiography or psychotherapy, neither should we ignore them or treat them as if they did not exist.

Bluntly, obsession with method is not necessarily the same as an obsession with producing good, readable, insightful criticism. Here, The recent broadside on research in public address by Hart (1986) asserts publicly what many have held privately for some time:

> Another trait that has undermined otherwise useful research in public address is what might be termed the translation fallacy, a feeling on the parts of critics that they are performing well when they are able to talk about a public message via some specialized critical language. Such a procedure more often results in the critic re-saying the message than in analyzing it. Some critics seem to presume that the more arcane their critical vocabulary the more sophisticated their analysis. In such cases, little attention is paid to (1) the epistemological assumptions imbedded in the technical vocabulary or (2) the methodological appropriateness of marrying the method with the message in question. Instead, critical systems are super-imposed willy-nilly on some innocent rhetorical event until, for example, the remarks of some Georgia peanut-farmer are rendered in the critical patois of some continental existentialist (p. 290).

This trend increases the difficulty of communication among critics and also estranges critics from their non-technical readers, who must often wonder where the joy and appreciation is to be found in such a tedious and officious activity.

Critics and Bureaucrats

We choose the metaphor of the bureaucrat to describe this state of affairs because it aptly describes this objectionable trend. Consider the makeup of the quintessential bureaucrat: A bureaucrat desires anonymity, and avoids taking personal responsibility for any decisions for which he or she might be held answerable. A bureaucrat thrives in the mystery of the hierarchy to which he or she belongs, and is never so happy as when any potentially-disruptive question can be disposed of by reference to the principles of the hierarchy. A bureaucrat seeks distance from the world outside the hierarchy, regarding with distaste or indifference anything or anyone not of the bureaucracy. A bureaucrat's first duty is to the perpetuation of the rules and regulations into which the bureaucracy has become solidified.

Now consider how aptly this characterization applies to many of the critics we have all encountered at conferences, during conventions, and in our journals:

> How often do we see critics placing implicit trust in their critical methods, relying upon their formulaic nature to substitute for the coveted "scientific objectivity" of the scientist?

How many times have we read a critical essay whose sole insight seems to be that the phenomenon under examination can be forced into the category system of his or her favorite "method?"

How many conversations between critics have we seen grind to a halt once each had ascertained the allegiance of the other--to semiotics, deconstruction, dramatism, marxism, or whatever?

How many critics have we heard announce proudly that they are embarking on a Burkean analysis (we could as easily substitute a number of other stances) of some text, only to see them look at us in mystification when we ask them what insight they expect to gain from the exercise?

Worse still, how many times have we caught such tendencies in ourselves?

Professional and institutional pressures toward esoteric specialization aggravate this problem; so do pedagogical habits. A favorite story in research method classes is Kaplan's account of the small boy with the new hammer who suddenly finds that everything around him needs hammering (Kaplan, 1964). We resurrect this bromide to remind our students that the tools with which we equip them have specific attributes which make them appropriate for some areas of inquiry and not appropriate for others. We try to make our students see that, contrary to the behavior of the little boy, not everything that might be battered with a hammer is in need of hammering.

In criticism, each text generates specific critical possibilities which are unique to that text. This unique set of attributes serves

to guide the critic to appropriate methods for discovering the answers to these questions. While certain genres of criticism may have a stock set of questions--apologia, for example--there are items within or surrounding any given text which generate text-specific areas of inquiry. This text-specificity requires that techniques be brought to bear on a given text which will unfold meanings, answer the text-specific questions, and generate relevant insight. Yes, a hammer will force a wood screw into a board, but a screwdriver is a more appropriate tool for the job. So too are some critical techniques more appropriate to some texts than others.

Equally important, as we have dwelt upon above, is the fact that not all critics are equally adept at all methods. While we are all familiar with more than one critical approach, and may even be able to demonstrate some level of mechanical competence with several of them, we are not equally suited, by experience, intuition, temperament, or inclination, for every critical approach to texts.

Critics, Texts, and Critical Methods

It is no simple problem we are discussing here: Most of us would agree that we do not want to see the "mystique of the text" gain a hold in our work, leading us to the fallacious belief that a text permits one and only one correct or definitive interpretation. Neither do we want to create the conditions whereby all critical interpretations, no matter how irresponsible, become equally defensible in the absence of any agreed-upon critical standards. Yet the only currently available alternative seems to be in the strictures of the bureaucracy. How can we strike the much-needed balance between the habits and inclinations of the critic and the autonomy of the

text, without resorting to the bureaucracy of method? A closer look at how the bureaucracy is formed and maintained may suggest an answer.

It seems to us that many critics proceed by what would be a slightly advanced case of the boy with a hammer. Call it the instance of the "boy-with-small-toolbox," wherein the limitations of any small collection of critical methods and analogs restrict the type or number of critical tasks which can be undertaken. This state of affairs is not a particularly surprising way of describing scholastic critics, for two reasons. First, the ideal of a critic adept with an endless array of critical approaches is a practical impossibility; it requires time and practice to hone critical skills in a specific method to such a fine edge that the critic may offer valuable insights to his or her audience. From this point of view, limitations in approaches are not only inevitable, but desirable.

Second, though, the general shape of graduate (and to a lesser extent, undergraduate) education produces pressure toward bureaucratization of criticism--and this we find neither desirable nor inevitable. Because of the vagaries of the faculty at a given university, certain critical methodologies, as well as broader yet more subtle attitudes about criticism in general, take on a greater visibility and importance. Indeed, the phrase "school of criticism" takes a double meaning when we consider how an individual's critical perspectives are often developed. Once again, however, we emphasize that our objection is not to method or "school," but to blind, mechanical, indifferent subservience of the critic to a particular method or "school" at the cost of good criticism.

The condition seems to have infiltrated most training grounds for critics. In doctoral education, for example, a student often

apprentices himself or herself to a particular faculty member who trains the student in his or her own specialty. Soon, "invisible colleges" are formed, made up of the mentor and former graduate students who continually reinforce the importance of their work to one another.

Sadly, another fertile field for the raising of young bureaucrat-critics is at the far end of the pedagogical spectrum from doctoral research--the competitive forensics tournament circuit. Putting aside for the moment the irony fundamentally implicit in "competitive criticism," we have been struck by the heavy reliance upon methodological correctness as the standard by which judges rank entrants in the rhetorical criticism/communication analysis events at forensics tournaments (German, 1985; Dean, 1985). In departments with active forensics programs the most arcane discussions of methodological intricacies often come not from the senior faculty, but rather from undergraduates who have long ago lost any sense of what interested them about that speech, pamphlet or advertising campaign, caught up as they are in the paper chase of the almost-Jesuitical distinctions of "correct" method drawn by tournament judges.

These are some of the pressures, from the top of academia to the bottom, which maintain the critical bureaucracy. As the mentor and pupil become entrenched in the practices of their organization--practices reinforced by hiring committees, college promotion and tenure committees, reviewers, editors, coaches, and judges--the method becomes entrenched as well.

When critics succumb to these pressures, forming unquestioning allegiance to the application of one method, the proper relationship between tool and text is reversed. Where originally the tool or

method was the means by which to enlighten and to resolve questions about the text, under these pressures the text has become the tool by which critics demonstrate the versatility of their own method. The focus is thereby shifted from an understanding of the text to a demonstration of the method. Critics thus often become like the musician who has become more interested in the workings of his or her instrument than in the music it might produce.

This desire to demonstrate the virtuosity of our method--or of the ideology which underlies it--has led critics sometimes to ignore those special attributes of a text which suggest the appropriateness (or inappropriateness) of a given critical method. When this happens, the questions asked of a text (if any are indeed asked) do not arise naturally from confluence of the critic's curiosity and the peculiarities of the text, but are stock concerns of the method being applied. Critics become bureaucrats in their method, following a narrow, rigid, formal routine as established by strictures of the method. Earlier we poked rhetorical fun at the critics who end their conversation once they have learned one another's methodological affiliation, yet the kernel of truth is easily recognized: how often have we realized at the end of the first page of that essay by that marxist (or whatever) critic that we "know where it's headed"? And how often have we trudged hopefully to the end of that essay only to find the inevitable and predictable conclusions imposed upon the text?

The task which such an awareness presents us is to find a way back to the human curiosity, intuition, and appreciation which was once at the heart of our roles as critics. We need a way to remove methodological formalism from its central role in critical practice, without obliterating the importance of critical rigor in the process,

so that the experience and interpretation of texts can return to main stage in our criticism.

We have come full circle to the problem we first examined: how, as critics, can we productively distinguish between the methodological procedures by which we organize and justify our critical essays and the experience of appreciation and curiosity which first draws us as critics to a particular text?

Against the Bureaucratization of Criticism

How are critics to resist the bureaucratic forces, in their training and practice? We are keenly aware that even to raise such a topic seems to be "spitting into the institutional wind." Academic performance--whether in forensics, classroom instruction, paper presentation, or publication--takes place within institutional organizations which are themselves becoming freighted with bureaucratic urges. As administrations look for ways to facilitate their own operation, policies develop, decision-makers are selected, neat categories are promulgated, and the bureaucracy builds. While there are philosophical and methodological foundations to the issues we raise here, we should never forget that they take their place within an institutional and political context sharing equal responsibility.

Change at the institutional level--especially a "quick fix"--would seem nearly impossible in the face of the sheer inertia of the organization. Institutional changes will only be possible when those served by the institution demand it. So it is upon the individual--the practicing critic, the teacher of criticism, the student of criticism--that we must focus our attention and pin our hopes.

For change to occur, it must begin at the individual level, with individual acts of rebellion against the bureaucracy. As producers, teachers, and consumers of criticism, we must break our unreflective habits. Practicing critics must evaluate their own motives in selecting critical objects and formulating questions; teachers of criticism must help their students appreciate the difference between a worthwhile question and a critical method; and consumers must measure the criticism they read and hear against the standards of insight and usefuness, rather than technical bravura. We must hold critics and their criticism--ourselves and our own criticism--accountable to the criteria of insightful, useful, human criticism, and not to the bureaucracy of method.

Ultimately, our prospects as critics rest upon the fact that the experience of criticism is itself fundamentally anti-bureaucratic. We offer this claim in the belief that the most interesting moments leading up to a finished critical essay have little to do with the intricacies of this or that method. Rather, what makes criticism interesting is the collision between a text, with all of its own tradition and context, and a critic, with all of his or her interests, intuitions, commitments, and curiosity. We base this claim upon our original distinction between the circular and inductive movement of critical appreciation, on one hand, and the linear and deductive movement of formal critical justification on the other. We recognize the importance of formal method, in making critical findings shareable and defensible and in curbing tendencies toward solipsism, but we nevertheless find debate over method <u>per se</u> to be less interesting, frankly, than the witnessing of human beings, as critics, sharing with others the meaning they have uncovered in some part of their world.

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